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Oral Sex, Young People, and Gendered Narratives of Reciprocity

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Young people in many countries report gender differences in giving and receiving oral sex, yet examination of young people's own perspectives on gender dynamics in oral heterosex are relatively rare. We explored the constructs and discourses 16- to 18-year-old men and women in England used in their accounts of oral sex during in-depth interviews. Two contrasting constructs were in circulation in the accounts: on one hand, oral sex on men and women was narrated as equivalent, while on the other, oral sex on women was seen as "a bigger deal" than oral sex on men. Young men and women used a "give and take" discourse, which constructed the mutual exchange of oral sex as "fair." Appeals to an ethic of reciprocity in oral sex enabled women to present themselves as demanding equality in their sexual interactions, and men as supporting mutuality. However, we show how these ostensibly positive discourses about equality also worked in narratives to obscure women's constrained agency and work with respect to giving oral sex.

Young people's reports suggest there are gender differences in giving and receiving oral sex. Among young men and women in the United Kingdom, for instance, a higher proportion agreed that men expect to be given oral sex (i.e., oral-penis contact) than agreed women expect to receive it (i.e., oral-vulva contact) (43% vs. 20%) (Stone, Hatherall, Ingham, & McEachran, 2006). In the United States and Canada, studies record more young men and women reporting experience of oral-penis than oral-vulva contact with a different-gender partner, both across their lifetime (Fortenberry et al., 2010), and in their most recent oral sex encounter (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2012). Other studies indicate men may receive more frequent oral sex than young women; for example, an online survey with U.S. college students ($n = 1,928$, 62% female) found that women were more likely than men to report giving oral sex more often than they received it, and men were more likely than women to report receiving oral sex more often than giving it (Chambers, 2007). These disparities arise despite roughly similar proportions of young men and women in nationally-representative surveys

reporting ever having experienced oral sex with a different-gender partner (Chandra et al., 2011, Mercer et al., 2013).

Existing research offers some insights into understanding asymmetric patterns of oral sex between young men and women. Feminist theorists have foregrounded symbolic meanings of mouths and genitals: "Oral sex is an encounter of two of the most intensely inscribed and invested areas of the body in our culture: an encounter of the most public site, the face/head, with the most private, the genitals" (Roberts, Kippax, Spongberg, & Crawford, 1996, p. 9). As mouths are constructed as susceptible to contagion (Nettleton, 1988), the perceived cleanliness of different body parts is a key criterion defining our "mouthrules"—the social rules governing what we will (or will not) consider putting in our mouths (Thorogood, 2000). As Thorogood (2000) explained, "to allow something 'inside' [the mouth] is to allow it 'emotional closeness', to accord it the status of intimacy [...] to keep it at an emotional and social distance, i.e. 'outside' yourself, it has to be constructed as 'dirt'" (p. 177). While distaste about using one's mouth characterizes both men's and women's accounts of giving oral sex (Burns, Futch, & Tolman, 2011; Duncombe & Marsden, 1996; Roberts et al., 1996), the particular emphasis on contamination in men's accounts may relate to popular constructions of women's bodies as leaky, uncontained, and "abject" (Kristeva, 1982), and vulvas, vaginal secretions, and menstrual blood as associated with filth and disease (Roberts et al., 1996). The pervasive negativity

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about vulvas may also contribute to some women's ambivalence about receiving oral sex (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001).

Social norms prioritizing men's sexual pleasure over women's may also influence the greater frequency of oral sex on men than women. While there is empirical evidence of an association between oral-vulva contact and orgasm among women in the United States and Australia (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012; Richters, de Visser, Rissel, & Smith, 2006), there is no straightforward cultural script about whether women "should" desire it, or men "should" give it. Expectations about oral-vulva contact may vary according to relationship context: Recent studies have found U.S. college women seemed to expect reciprocal oral sex in "committed relationships" but were ambivalent about whether women should expect to receive oral sex in interactions classified as hookups (Armstrong et al., 2012; Backstrom, Armstrong, & Puentes, 2012). Armstrong and colleagues (2012) suggested young women's entitlement to sexual pleasure has become expected within relationships but is not treated as a priority in hookups. In interviews with young women and men at two U.S. universities, they found male students framed orgasms for their girlfriends as "important" and a "responsibility," but they did not emphasize this for hookups. Similar distinctions were made by male university students in an earlier Australian study (Roberts et al., 1996) where oral-vulva contact with "steady girlfriends" was framed to some extent as "a required part of 'modern' and 'enlightened' sexual experience" (though with little mention of pleasure), but such a "duty" was not necessary with "casual partners" (p. 110).

Despite compelling evidence of inequities in the meaning and practice of oral sex between young men and women, notions of mutuality and equality nevertheless appear to be an important part of the discursive landscape within which young people make sense of their oral sex encounters. Backstrom et al. (2012), for instance, found reciprocity appeared to be a salient concept within U.S. female college students' accounts of cunnilingus, although its meaning varied; while most of the women interpreted reciprocity as "a literally even exchange of sexual acts and orgasms," in cases where they gave but did not receive oral sex they redefined it as a general value—"a matter of overall mutual sexual pleasure, rather than keeping a scorecard" (p. 7). Contemporary discourse about reciprocity in oral sex may in part be a legacy of discourses of mutuality which were central to attempts to legitimize oral sex among older adults over the course of the 20th century (Curtis & Hunt, 2007; Hunt & Curtis, 2006). Mutual performance of cunnilingus and fellatio seemed to some "to offer the possibility of making heterosexual sex more reciprocal and egalitarian. Either partner could do it, and either could, presumably enjoy it" (Ehrenreich et al., 1986, p. 81, cited in Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003, p. 239).

Work from Braun and colleagues (2003), however, suggested that even "notions of reciprocity are not necessarily as liberatory as they may seem" (p. 253). Their analysis of adult men's and women's accounts of

giving and receiving orgasms revealed how mutually reciprocal orgasmic sex was constructed by participants as "right" and "desirable," meaning that instances of "non-reciprocal" sex (i.e., where one partner does not reach orgasm) could become constructed as "somehow 'wrong' or problematic" (p. 245). They showed how a collision between a discourse of reciprocity and other dominant discourses of heterosex can produce entitlements and obligations that can make sexual "choices" problematic, especially for women, who may feel obliged to have vaginal intercourse in exchange for receiving "their" orgasm. Noting that meanings are unlikely to be singular or fixed, Braun et al. call for continuing critiques of claims about sexual reciprocity.

While the growing literature examining young people's own perspectives on their sexual lives offers important insights into gender dynamics in oral sex, the work has focused largely on those in higher education and on young women rather than young men. In one of the few studies including younger teens, Burns and colleagues (2011) explored 12- to 17-year-old girls' "fellatio narratives," in which stories of shame, guilt, and anxiety coexist alongside accounts of women as sexual initiators, "moments of desire," and a sense of competence and pleasure attained through "mastery of a new and relationally valuable skill" (p. 249). Notwithstanding the more positive fragments of these narratives, girls' accounts of giving oral sex emphasized satisfying men's needs and desires rather than their own. Burns et al. described an additional set of concerns in these teens' accounts regarding their technical skill, and evaluation of that skill by male partners: "now there are contingencies of their performance level, consequences not attached to whether they have simply engaged in sexual activity at all [...] but if their participation was good enough, met normative standards and benchmarks" (p. 248). Examination of younger men's accounts of giving and receiving oral sex is largely absent from the literature.

In this article we explored 16- to 18-year-old women's and men's accounts of oral sex. Informed by a broadly constructionist perspective, our focus here is on examining the meanings circulating within young people's talk about oral sex and exploring how our interviewees use, resist, and rework these varied—and sometimes contradictory—discursive resources in their accounts of oral sex encounters. Our approach was informed by an understanding that discourses "enable and constrain people's options for how to be and act in the social world" (Braun et al., 2003, p. 241). We examine the apparently contradictory constructs of oral sex circulating in young people's narratives and explored how these apparent contradictions help elucidate contemporary meanings and dynamics of oral sex between young men and women.

METHOD

Participants

Our analysis drew on data from a qualitative study that explored the meanings of different sexual practices among a

diverse sample of young people ages 16 to 18. Participants were recruited from three socially and geographically contrasting sites in England: (a) London, (b) a medium-sized northern city, and (c) a rural area in the southwest. We conducted 71 semistructured interviews with 16- to 18-year-olds, with follow-up interviews one year later ($n = 43$). All participants were invited to participate in a second interview, designed to capture accounts of change and continuity in the intervening period. We focus on the in-depth interview data here, although we also conducted group discussions (see Lewis, Marston, & Wellings, 2013 for details). Interviews were conducted in 2010 and 2011.

In each field site, we recruited through schools/colleges, youth organizations, and informal networks in a deliberately varied range of settings to obtain diversity in participants' backgrounds. To ensure inclusion of young people from less socially advantaged groups, we recruited through youth organizations targeting young people not in education or training ($n = 9$) and, in London, through a supported housing project for young people living independently from their families ($n = 4$). We also used snowball sampling and, in the southwest, we used convenience sampling, approaching young people directly in a town center. Throughout recruitment we emphasized that interviewees need not be sexually experienced to take part.

Our in-depth interview participants were 37 women and 34 men aged 16 to 18 (see Table 1 for characteristics of our sample). Most interviewees were living with their parent(s) ($n = 65$) and studying full or part time ($n = 60$); 55 were White, 12 Black (three born outside of the United Kingdom), three of mixed background, and one Asian British. Participants varied in the number and nature of their sexual partnerships (e.g., "long-term relationships," "one-offs," "fuck buddies") and the range of sexual practices they had experienced. At first interview, 10 out of 71 participants reported either no sexual experience (self-defined) whatsoever, kissing only, or kissing and touching

breasts/having breasts touched; 46 reported having "given" oral sex, and 52 reported having "received" oral sex. By second interview, an additional five reported having given oral sex, and an additional four reported having received it. Three women and one man reported genital contact with same-sex partners. Please note that as we did not use a probability sample, these numbers are reported here for information only and should not be understood to represent in a statistical sense the proportions that would be found in the general population. Among those lost to follow-up (11 women, 17 men) we were unable to reestablish contact with 18 (including four out of five young people living independently from their families at first interview), four declined, and six were unavailable at a mutually convenient time.

The study was approved by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine Ethics Committee, and all participants gave written consent to participate. As the age of sexual consent in the United Kingdom is 16, and in accordance with U.K. ethical guidelines on research with young people aged 16 and over (Shaw, Brady, & Davey, 2011), we did not seek parental consent. To ensure young people had time to consider their participation, we did not interview them on the day they were recruited, and we encouraged them to discuss their potential participation with anyone they wished. We also discussed our obligation to share with relevant authorities any disclosures relating to a child being harmed.

Interview Methods

In the in-depth interviews, we sought to elicit accounts of the meanings of various different sexual practices, whether or not our interviewees had personally experienced them. In the first round of interviews, we used a topic guide to explore participants' perspectives on, and experiences of, different sexual activities, including their sequence, timing, relationship, and situational context; perceptions of friends'

Table 1. Interviewees' Characteristics at First Interview

Demographics	Women	Men	Total
Field site			
London	12	11	23
Northern city	13	10	23
Rural southwest	12	13	25
Age			
16	11	5	16
17	24	24	48
18	2	5	7
Primary occupation			
Studying full or part time	33	27	60
Working full or part time	0	2	2
Apprenticeship	0	1	1
Unemployed/looking for work	4	4	8
Residence			
Living with parent(s)	35	30	65
Living with other family	0	1	1
Living independently	2	3	5

and peers' sexual activity; and future sexual and relationship aspirations. In the second interviews, we explored themes that had emerged from across the set of first interviews and issues specific to each participant.

Given the particular sensitivity of teenagers discussing their personal sexual experiences with adult interviewers (we are both White, middle-class women more than a decade older than the interviewees), we took several steps to try to minimize participants' potential discomfort. While we offered participants the option of being interviewed by a man, none elected to do so, and all said either that they were neutral or that they would prefer a female interviewer. All interviews were conducted in private rooms, mostly in institutional settings already familiar to the participant (e.g., rooms in youth and community centers, counselors' offices at schools/colleges). Each topic guide started with questions about young people's lives more generally so that the first part of the interview did not focus on sexuality but "warmed up" to more sensitive topics through discussion of friendship and peer networks, family relationships, and education/employment experiences. In the first interview, our initial question directly addressing sexuality invited young people to share what the word *sex* meant to them, after which we asked whether they had had any experiences that they considered "sexual." Our emphasis throughout was on eliciting narratives about the meanings of different sexual practices rather than on collecting an exhaustive sexual history. We encouraged participants to use whatever language was most comfortable for them in discussing sexual practices, and—wherever possible—we waited for interviewees to introduce and explain their own vocabulary. Interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with interviewee permission.

Data Analysis

We used NVivo 8 software to organize the transcripts and field notes during analysis.

After familiarizing ourselves with the data through reading and rereading transcripts, we used an inductive—or "bottom up"—approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to our analysis, initially using line-by-line ("open") coding to identify multiple themes and concepts. During this initial analysis, we identified a constellation of themes relating to oral sex that were consistent across the field sites, including ideas about cleanliness, disgust, choice, and reciprocity. For the present study, we examined all accounts of oral sex across the entire data corpus and identified the varied constructs and discourses our participants used to frame and explain their talk about oral sex. We encouraged our participants to reflect on the meaning of different sexual activities whether or not they had personal experience of them, and so most interviews included talk about oral sex. We made constant comparisons within and between cases and sought counterexamples to challenge our emerging interpretations.

We use the colloquial terms *giving* (to indicate the person using his or her mouth) and *receiving* (to indicate the individual's partner) throughout for brevity, but these terms are not straightforward (as we describe in the following section); for

example, in some contexts, giving may be assumed to be more onerous or to confer less pleasure than receiving. We do not wish to imply any such additional meaning when we use these terms.

Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Results

We identified two seemingly contradictory discourses regarding oral heterosex, which we describe first below. Most participants drew on both discourses in their accounts, and in the second part we examine what is produced at their intersection.

Giving and Receiving Oral Heterosex: Narratives of Cost, Benefit, and (In)equivalence

Our analysis revealed two seemingly competing constructions of oral sex in circulation in young people's accounts: oral sex on men and women as equivalent and—sometimes simultaneously—oral sex on women as "a bigger deal" than oral sex on men.

Oral Sex on Men and Women Is Equivalent

Many young men and women called on the idea of reciprocity in their accounts of oral sex: "it's give and take," "you give to receive," "you do me, I'll do you," and so on. Explanations of this ethic often emphasized equivalence between oral-penis and oral-vulva contact. Helen, for example, described a straightforward exchange between "pairs" of activities:

Like when you think of, um, like fingering and like tossing off and stuff, it's kind of like, they're like pairs, so that's what like happens. And like licking out [oral-vulva contact] and blow jobs, it's like, they like go together, *it's like what happens with one person happens to another*. (Helen, 17-year-old woman, southwest, emphasis added)

In this construction of oral sex as equivalent and reciprocal, participants did not distinguish between oral sex on men versus on women: Both practices were described as "intimate" or "personal," with accounts of intimacy often referring to genitals as being unappealing for oral contact:

Like male and female genitalia aren't exactly, like, kinda the nicest things in the world, and doing that for someone, it's kinda, y'know, it's different to just before [i.e. doing sexual activities perceived as less intimate], you're actually kinda using your mouth and stuff. So it's ... and it kinda takes a level of trust and stuff, and things like that. (Owen, 17-year-old man, southwest)

In line with this, narratives of giving oral sex typically emphasized lack of benefits for—or costs to—the person "going down":

Blow jobs are never really portrayed as sort of an act because you actually like or love a person [...] I guess that's partly because only one person would get anything out of it. It's not an act for two people: it's one person giving someone else pleasure. (Cameron, 16-year-old man, north)

Oral Sex on Men Is *Not* Equivalent to Oral Sex on Women

As well as being constructed as equivalent to oral-penis contact, however, oral-vulva contact was also commonly constructed as a "far bigger deal" than oral-penis contact, both for men and for women. Carl's account is typical of young men's comparisons between the two practices:

I think giving head is probably a lot less worse for girls than a boy licking out a girl, because [...] with a boy, it is just skin, basically, and with a girl, it is more like ... it's skin, but it's sort of wet and fleshy, and it's different. And that's where they pee out of as well. Like it is ... obviously boys pee out of their dick as well, but, like, only at the end. Like all the pee touches all of that area, sort of ... quite a lot more of what you are licking.

So it is like ... sort of ...

Probably more dirty ... I dunno. (Carl, 17-year-old man, London)

Many young men's accounts of the additional costliness of their giving oral sex to women (compared with the costs for women of giving to men) referred to vulvas negatively—as "dirty," "disgusting," "nasty," "droopy," "messy," "saggy," "stinking." Some young Londoners also mentioned reputational cost for men known to have "gone down" on a woman—locally referred to as "bocating": "They call you a bocat if ... it's an insult basically, but if you were to get [oral sex] from a girl just the complete opposite [i.e., you would be congratulated]" (Ethan, 16-year-old man, London); and "[if] a guy does it to a girl ... boy that is his life over because everyone knows about it" (Malik, 18-year-old man, London). For young men in other locales, giving oral sex to women did not appear to carry such a strong reputational risk, but its reported absence from men's discussions with one another suggests it confers less status than sexual activities involving penis stimulation: "We ['lads'] talk about like getting tossed off or 'oh yeah, I got sucked off by so-and-so at the weekend,' 'I had sex with so-and-so,' but they don't say, 'oh yeah, I licked her out'" (Will, 18-year-old man, north).

The notion that oral-vulva contact was more costly was also evident in young women's accounts, which included two related ideas: first, that it was "easier" for women to give oral sex than for men; and second, that it was easier for men to receive oral sex and, crucially, to enjoy receiving it than it was for women:

I think anything to a girl, the way girls talk about it, is more of a big deal than it would be to a boy. [...] I think you'd be more likely to give a blow job because licking out, again, like ... girls have a lot of insecurities [...] like I said about [pubic] hair and things like that because, 'cause in school boys made such a big deal about things like that. And [...] yeah, I think ... I think it's more of a big deal for a girl to, like, be licked out. (Pippa, 16-year-old woman, southwest)

I think all males really like it being done to them but, um, like, it's ... a lot of girls say, like, the same, it's just ... they don't really like it. They feel uncomfortable.

What are the general concerns about it do you think, when you say people feel uncomfortable?

Um ... I don't know. I think it's sort of the same thing that you're not really doing anything; it's sort of being done to you. I don't like that, and yeah, I just, I dunno ... I guess it's like, generally an area you're not very confident, but, well, I'm not. (Becky, 17-year-old woman, north)

A few women (all of whom were in longer-term relationships) briefly mentioned enjoying receiving oral sex,¹ but women's accounts of oral-vulva contact were dominated by talk about their anxieties about their vulvas being sensed (seen, smelled, tasted), judged, and discussed by men. The widely held belief that giving oral sex to women was unpleasant for men pervaded women's narratives to such an extent that male partners perceived to be enthusiastic about oral-vulva contact were referred to as "weird" or "different."

Men, by contrast, generally expressed unqualified enthusiasm for receiving oral sex, with "blow jobs" described as desirable because of their sensory appeal (e.g., wetness); because they complemented vaginal intercourse ("it stops you getting bored"; "it makes it interesting before we have sex"); because they demonstrated their partner's devotion ("it's showing that she really likes you"); and because they involved little effort from them ("it's good when you're tired"; "you're not doing all the work, you're just sitting back and relaxing"²). They attributed less enjoyable experiences to women's poor technique, perhaps because men also described generally stopping activities they did not enjoy or also perhaps because they were unwilling to locate themselves within what would be a highly unusual narrative for men (i.e., not liking blow jobs). Three young men said they did not want to be given oral sex in a relationship because they considered it "disrespectful" to their girlfriends, although all said that they were comfortable being given oral sex by a casual partner.

The Discursive Terrain of Oral Sex: Intersections of Contradictory Constructs

Our interviewees often drew on both discourses—that oral sex on men and women was both equivalent and not

equivalent—within the same narrative, yet interviewees did not comment on the apparent paradoxes that resulted (i.e., how can oral sex on men and women be both equivalent and not equivalent at the same time?). We examined young men's and young women's accounts to understand more about how these seemingly contradictory discourses operate and the effects at their intersection.

We identified three key themes: First, men must tread carefully when accounting for giving oral sex to women; second, the intersection creates a discursive space for young women to challenge sexual inequality; and third, the intersection works as a decoy, distracting from other inequalities in the negotiation of oral sex between men and women.

Accounting for the Expense of Giving: Young Men's Narratives

For the most part, in line with the idea that oral sex on men and women "should" be reciprocal, young men's accounts suggested that they expected men to give women oral sex, and not just vice versa. Many (21 out of 34 men in the in-depth interviews) had given oral sex to a woman at least once. However, "going down" appeared to require more accounting "work" for men than for women, presumably in part reflecting the simultaneous construction of giving oral sex as costlier for men. Men who had given women oral sex often emphasized what they gained from doing so, perhaps as a way to account for this perceived expense:

If the girl wants it, then I'll do it. I don't mind doing it. I don't dislike it. It don't do 'owt for me *obviously*.

Does that matter?

No, got to give it, haven't you, to receive it. That's it.

Do you?

Yeah, or I suppose.

Is it like that?

Yeah, you've *got to* give it to receive it. It's a two-way street. You can't just expect it all the time.

But are there some circumstances, or have you had any experiences where you've got a blow job and not given back, or ... ?

Yeah, 'cause some girls aren't comfortable with ... like I know there's girls who just don't like it.

Do you know why that is?

No. Just don't like it. (Daryl, 17-year-old man, north, our emphasis)

Daryl invoked the idea of a widely understood reciprocity imperative to explain his behavior ("you've got to give it to receive it"), implying that this is equal ("a two-way street"). Yet Daryl also acknowledged that he is not always called upon to reciprocate. His account (and the accounts of many other men) suggested he took for granted that he would receive oral-penis contact. The only real uncertainty is about how often this will happen ("you can't just expect it all the time"). He portrayed himself as committed to mutuality, using the idea of oral-vulva contact as costly to women to explain why he might not reciprocate ("some girls aren't comfortable ... just don't like it"). In other words, when he did not reciprocate, he said, it is because of her discomfort, not his unwillingness. This allowed him to portray himself as fully compliant with a reciprocal imperative without actually having to reciprocate each time.

Like Daryl, other young men emphasized how giving oral sex was not physically pleasurable for them, although they sometimes said they wished to please their partner and also occasionally referred to oral-vulva contact as a "treat" or a "favor" they would bestow:

It's probably more satisfaction with her liking it than you liking it, that you do it for, I think. Um ... it doesn't give me amazing thrills. (Luke, 17-year-old man, southwest)

I think it's a lot more enjoyable, er, receiving oral sex than giving it. But I—I dunno ...

When you say enjoyable, like in what ways?

Um, er ... like it kinda feels nice, it gives you shivers like, y'know, that kinda feeling. But actually giving it, you don't kinda get any, like, change in, kinda like ... physical change in your body. But it's nice knowing that you're making that person happy. (Owen, 17-year-old man, southwest)

Braun and colleagues (2003) described "positive identity positions" that men can assume in using ideas about reciprocity with respect to "giving" women orgasms, presenting themselves as caring, sensitive, generous lovers (p. 248). Such identity positions were also evident in our male interviewees' narratives of giving oral sex. There is a crucial difference, however: Giving a woman oral sex is potentially more stigmatizing than giving her an orgasm and may, therefore, require additional accounting work to mitigate potential costs (e.g., to a man's reputation). By emphasizing absence of "physical change in your body," men were able to narrate themselves as prioritizing their partner's pleasure while simultaneously discounting the possibility that they might find the (stigmatizing) practice erotic.

Only two young men in our study expressed enthusiasm for giving oral sex—one only to his long-term girlfriend and the other to multiple casual partners. Both described themselves as atypical; for instance, the latter man said:

I'm not afraid to say that I do lick girls out. Most boys find that disgusting, but I don't.

Why would you be afraid to say that?

No, well, 'round here, it's like everyone goes, "Oh you're a bocat," and stuff like that. You must have heard that word before?

Yeah.

I'm not afraid to say I do it—I do it, and I enjoy it. I say that in front of my friends. Even people that think it's disgusting, I still say it to them. I say: "I don't care what you think!" (Shane, 17-year-old man, London)

Shane's narrative directly engages with the construction of oral-vulva contact as costly to men, using it to present himself as highly agentic ("I don't care what you think!").

Of the 13 men who had not given oral sex to a woman, 10 strongly emphasized that they did not want to do so.³ Nine of these 10 reported having received oral sex from women. Men who said they received but did not give oral sex alluded to notions of reciprocity in their accounts, though they positioned themselves differently in relation to this discourse:

Not a lot of my mates are a huge fan of actually giving it, I don't think. I think we're all just really quite selfish in that sense. Um ... I think it's just one of those things. You can take, but you can't give, sort of thing. (Liam, 17-year-old man, southwest)

Me giving it? No! She [girlfriend] knows it would never happen. She knows it never, ever will happen.

Why's that?

I think it's disgusting. I mean it's good to get: That's where I would have to say I am a hypocrite 'cause I would receive it, but I would never give it. (Jayden, 17-year-old man, London)

Despite the seemingly self-deprecating evaluation of their behavior (as "hypocritical," "selfish"), Liam and Jayden appear untroubled by not reciprocating: "it's just one of those things."

Articulating Entitlement and Obligations to Receive: Young Women's Narratives

Unlike the men, young women in our study rarely explained or rationalized why they might give oral sex to men, possibly because oral-penis contact is simply understood as another way women use their bodies to help men ejaculate (see also Potts, 2002). Some women did, however,

report using the construct of oral sex on men and women as equivalent to claim their entitlement to oral-vulva contact. Carly (16-year-old woman, London), for instance, described arguing with male friends:

The guys are always like: "Yeah, well, I won't give head to a girl" or "I wouldn't lick out a girl because that's just nasty," and I says, "What, so she can give head to you and you can ask the girl for head, except you can't give it back to her?" Y'know, sex is for both of you, and that's the same with giving head and then licking someone out [...] It's kind of equal that way, if you both do it. You can't really expect it one way [...] if you're definitely not willing to give it to someone else while they're doing it to you. I think that is pretty unfair.

Carly challenged the construction of oral sex on women as more costly than on men. Her narrative, however, suggests men's willingness to give oral sex could be more important to her than whether it actually happens. Later in the interview, Carly referred to men's commitment to reciprocity as a sign of maturity: "As they're [her friends] growing up they're all starting to realize [that reciprocity in oral sex is fair]." Nevertheless, Carly expressed reluctance to engage in oral sex with her boyfriend:

Licking out doesn't really interest me to be honest [laugh].

Really?

No, not at the moment. Like, he's [Carly's boyfriend] offered it to me. He's said, "You know, if you did it to me, I'd do it back to you," and I said, "Well, I'm not too into the whole giving head thing at the moment." This was, like, before, and he said, "Okay, well, that doesn't bother me. Until you are ready, then you can do that to me, but if you want me to do that to you, then I'm willing to do that for you" [...] Like he was okay with that even though I said I didn't really want to, but I've kind of warmed up to the idea of giving head. It doesn't seem that bad.

In Carly's account, her boyfriend seemingly draws on constructs of oral sex equivalence to frame oral-vulva contact as desirable for her ("I'm willing to do that *for you*"), setting the stage for her obligation to return the favor. At her second interview, Carly said she had given her by then ex-boyfriend a "blow job" but had refused oral-vulva contact. She narrated her resistance as immaturity: "I sort of—I just got a bit childish about it. And he'd always be 'Oh God, grow up,' 'cause I was the older one in the relationship ... but yeah." For Carly, constructs of oral sex as equivalent may provide a way to claim oral-vulva contact in principle—"it's equal that way"—but her account suggested she saw herself at risk from the same constructs: both from her partner who used them to try to obtain oral-penis contact, and from being considered (or considering herself) immature for not receiving oral-vulva contact.

Several other young women described how men used ideas about reciprocity, giving or promising oral-vulva contact so the women would be obliged to “return the favor,” which most said they did. Gabrielle was an exception:

It was kinda strange because I didn’t ask him to do it; he just done it. And I just think that’s nasty, like, I’m going to pee and you’re licking ... you’re licking down there.

So what did you do? Like what happened?

Do you know when you’re just shocked? I wasn’t even enjoying nothing, I was just shocked: “What are you doing? Stop!” [Laughs]

Did he notice, or what ... ?

No. He didn’t because he was down there doing what he was doing, yeah [...] and then the next time I saw him, like the week after, he told me: “Because I’ve done it to you, you have to do it to me.” I was like: “You’re crazy! [laughs] Did I ask you to do it to me? I didn’t ask you. You just done it.” And I think he took it quite offensive. (Gabrielle, 17-year-old woman, London)

While women’s accounts of entitlement to receive oral sex were narrated in terms of a sense of general equality, few said that they directly asked their partners to “go down.” In a rare exception, one young woman described using constructions of equivalence and reciprocity to claim oral-vulva contact with her boyfriend:

I always used to say to him like, “Oh lick me out,” and [...] he was always like, “Ew, it’s horrible,” like, “I don’t—would never, don’t wanna do that.”

What do you think he thought was horrible about it?

I don’t know really. I always used ... I was like: “Well, I’m gonna have to put your cock in my mouth,” sort of thing, and he was like, “Oh, it’s your choice, you don’t have to do it.” I just think he didn’t like the thought of it. (Maddy, 16 year-old woman, southwest)

Once again, men giving oral sex is framed as optional compared with women’s giving, which is constructed as routine, taken for granted, or even obligatory (“I’m gonna have to put your cock in my mouth”). In this case, seemingly in response to this direct statement of obligation, Maddy’s boyfriend assures her: “It’s your choice, you don’t have to do it.” His appeal to personal choice appears to trump her appeal to reciprocity. Yet among our interviewees, narratives of choice to give oral sex also varied by gender.

Emphasizing Agency, Obscuring Work

Although men often referred to an ethic of reciprocity in their accounts of giving oral sex, their choice not to give

was generally narrated as overriding any obligation to “go down.” The majority of men who reported having given women oral sex described encounters where they stopped after a short time because they did not like it, tried it once but not again, or simply refused to go down at all with certain partners:

I know that a lot of boys are like that as well, like they wouldn’t go down on everyone, they ... I know a lot of people that would happily just like, have sex [vaginal intercourse] with people and do the other things, but going down is like ... different. It’s more like [long pause] think of the word, like [pause], I don’t know ... They, I think the girl’s gotta be good-looking and nice. ‘Cause I—I think, yeah, that’s it: like, if it’s not attractive, like it’s really not enjoyable, and you really don’t wanna do it, and if it smelled or it tasted horrible, if it, like, looked bad, or it was like hairy and you didn’t wanna do it, it’s really hard to do it. (Mark, 17-year-old man, southwest)

As illustrated in Mark’s account, unappealing vulval aesthetics (smell, taste, appearance, hair) and—crucially—just not wanting to give oral sex, were commonly narrated by men as plausible reasons to not go down.

By contrast, while the young women we spoke to frequently expressed distaste or even disgust about penises and the physicality of “giving head,” this was usually narrated in accounts of doing so rather than not: All but seven of the 37 women we interviewed reported having given oral sex. Gill (2007, 2008) argued that discourses of choice and empowerment are central to the postfeminist sensibility in contemporary Western media culture, where “a grammar of individualism” (Gill, 2007, p. 158) undermines concepts of social or cultural influence: “The notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever” (p. 159). Such narratives of “free choice” were evident in many young women’s accounts of giving oral sex, usually in the form of unprompted comments that they were “not under pressure.” Take Helen’s reflection, for instance:

I think ‘cause he’d already done it to me that I ... I wasn’t like under pressure to do it to him, but I felt like I should, so ... I mean, he wasn’t like forcing me to do it or anything. It was just ... it felt right then to do it.

And were there specific things that you were a bit concerned about, or ... ?

It wasn’t anything that I was, like, concerned about. I just didn’t wanna put it in my mouth [laughs]. ‘Cause it’s just a bit, like, ugh! (Helen, 17-year-old woman, southwest, our emphasis)

Although Helen says she did not want to put her boyfriend’s penis in her mouth, because he had given her oral sex, she

felt she “should.” She explains that doing so felt “right.” As well as women spontaneously telling us they had not been forced to give oral sex, men (also unprompted) often told us they did not force their partner, suggesting a wide understanding that oral-penis contact might be coerced. Nobody in the study implied men would ever be forced into oral-vulva contact.

Young women’s talk about “personal choice” and “not being pressured” sits alongside their numerous accounts of revulsion at the smell and taste of men’s genitals, of hating the sensation of “having a cock down your throat,” “gagging,” “choking,” and “feeling sick.” One of these women, Emma (17 years old), did not explicitly talk about force in her first interview, yet at her second interview a year later narrated past encounters in those terms, using her interactions with her current boyfriend, Tim, as a counterpoint:

I don’t mind if Tim asks ‘cause he’s not like ... I don’t know ... with some guys they just, like, force your head down, and it’s just like: “No, don’t do that.” But Tim just sort of lets me get on with it [laugh] really. No, I think that was why I was so uncomfortable with doing it before, ‘cause every other guy that I’ve been with was like pushing my head down, and I’m like [laugh]: “No, stop it.” But Tim just sort of lays there and takes it.

Even when Tim was “just sort of [lying] there,” however, Emma described other aspects of giving oral sex as “horrible”:

This sounds awful: I literally just put my mouth over it and it just ... [laughs] I was just like, “Ugh, Tim!” He was just like, “Swallow it!” I was like, “No,” and it went everywhere. It was horrible. I was so upset. He was like: “I’m sorry.” It was ... ugh [laughs].

So he wanted you to swallow?

Yeah.

Have you done that before?

Yeah, I hate it. I cannot stand it. But he was like, “Please.” I was just like, “No,” and then I ended up spitting everywhere, which was nasty [laughs].

Why did he want you to swallow it?

I don’t know. I did ask him that actually. I think it’s just a man thing. I don’t know. He didn’t really have a straight answer for it [laughs].

The account of the ejaculation (unexpected by Emma and unannounced by Tim) and his demand she swallow—something she “cannot stand”—seems somewhat contradictory to Emma’s overarching narrative of equality and care in their relationship (she seems to acknowledge this: “This sounds awful”). Her refusal to swallow, her questioning why he

wanted her to, and her evaluation of his response as inadequate (“He didn’t really have a straight answer”) could be interpreted as an example of agentic embodied practice (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2012), although if so this seems a far more restricted agency than appears in men’s accounts.

Negotiations over managing ejaculation in oral sex are well documented (Potts, 2002) and featured in many young women’s accounts. Some spoke of explicit agreements with their partners: “My ex knew from the start that I would—I would do it [give oral sex] but he—I would never swallow or even allow him to do that in my mouth, ever” (Leah, 17-year-old woman, southwest). While managing ejaculation appeared to be a possible topic of conversation between partners, the broader embodied experience of giving oral sex seemed more difficult to acknowledge directly. Emma, for instance, said she used different flavored lubricants for oral sex because she did not “really like the taste of penis”:

It just makes it sort of easier for me, and he’s just not really bothered about it [laughs], so ...

And did—did you sort of initiate that, or did he get it? Or ... ?

I did. I like brought it with me and stuff, and, um, I didn’t say ... I didn’t directly say to him, ‘cause I didn’t wanna, like, offend him or anything, because he would have taken it personally, [laughs] I knew he would have, so I thought, “I’ll just stick that there and see what happens,” really.

So do you think it is offensive? Do you—why would he ... ?

Oh, I don’t know. I think if I turned around to him and said, “I don’t like the taste of your penis” he’d probably be quite upset. I guess if he turned around to me and said, “I don’t like the taste of your vagina” then I’d probably be offended [laughs], so I guess it works the same sort of way. So I just didn’t really say anything. I just caked it in strawberry lube and carried on [laughs].

In her account, Emma presents herself as actively taking charge in providing a solution to her distaste (flavored lubricant), alluding to a tacit pact in which direct acknowledgment of distaste for one’s partner’s genitals is offensive. Other young women described strategies to make “blow jobs” more palatable, such as having a drink next to them to help mask the taste and consistency of semen, or using their hand as well as their mouth to provide extra stimulation so their partner ejaculated more quickly. Among our interviewees, such hidden labor in giving oral sex was described only by young women.

DISCUSSION

Our study contributes empirical data on narratives of oral sex encounters between young men and women. We found that ideas about reciprocity have discursive currency among

our young interviewees yet work to obscure considerable gender disparities in narratives of choice and work. This extends the existing body of work highlighting how men and women construct and invest in stories of equality and reciprocity which gloss over empirical realities of inequality in heterosexual practice (Braun et al., 2003; Frith, 2013) and in wider heterosexual relating (Hochschild, 1989).

Both young men and women in our study used a give-and-take discourse constructing the mutual exchange of oral sex as “fair.” Appeals to an ethic of reciprocity in oral sex enable women to present themselves as demanding—and perhaps achieving—equality in their sexual interactions, while men can use such ideas to present themselves as supporting mutuality. Notions of equivalence underpin the logic of the give-and-take discourse: Mutual exchange is considered “fair” because oral sex on men and women is constructed as essentially the same. Yet this construct is undermined by a conflicting and powerful discourse of nonequivalence between the two practices, in which “his” work in giving is constructed as more “costly,” and more easily refused, than “hers.”

Discourse about high cost of oral-vulva contact for men likely contributes to the overarching ambivalence about the practice in young women’s accounts: Despite access to notions of entitlement to receive oral sex, many young women in this study said they felt uncomfortable about a practice they constructed as being done “to” them (unlike vaginal intercourse, which was constructed as more mutual). Women’s accounts of their unease about receiving oral sex may partly reflect persisting discourses that prioritize men’s pleasure over women’s and recall women’s concerns described elsewhere about “taking too long” to reach orgasm (Braun et al., 2003, p. 252). Women’s concerns about men’s judgment of their genital aesthetics (visual appearance, smell, taste) may connect with recent trends suggesting an intensification of vulval modification practices among women, including the growing demand for female cosmetic genital surgery, such as medically unnecessary labiaplasty, including among women under 18 years old in the United Kingdom (British Society for Paediatric & Adolescent Gynaecology, 2013).

Understanding the conditions under which young women, and—crucially—young men might develop and articulate more positive accounts of vulvas is an important area for further study. There is some evidence that favorable experiences of oral sex may be one context where positive accounts can develop. For example, one study with affluent college-aged women in the United States found women believed their male partners “desired, wanted and enjoyed cunnilingus as much as they did themselves” (Bay-Cheng & Fava, 2011, p. 539). Another study found young women narrated particular men’s enthusiasm for giving oral sex as having transformed their reluctance to receive it. The authors suggested that “learning to like cunnilingus is often a collaborative and negotiated process” (Backstrom et al., 2012, p. 8). Our participants’ more pessimistic accounts of oral-vulva contact may reflect the younger age

of our sample, with men and women likely earlier in their sexual careers. The highly negative “bocat” discourse among young Londoners in our study, for instance, has also been documented in other work with younger teens. Based on group and individual interviews with young people aged 12–15 in London, Jessica Ringrose and colleagues highlighted a “heterosexualised visual economy” (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill & Livingstone, 2013, p. 319) in which digital evidence of boys performing cunnilingus can be used as a way to shame them, perhaps because it involves “being seen to give up something around a hard, sexually aggressive, to be serviced, version of hetero-masculinity” (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015, p. 213). The authors found that digital “proof” of girls performing fellatio, or even just implying intention to perform, garners boys reputational rewards, while young women faced a range of potential negative repercussions for generating and exchanging digital sexual content. The familiar sexual double standard we observed in our study circulating in young people’s talk about flesh-on-flesh oral sexual practice, then, also appears to permeate teenagers’ digital sexual interaction.

The presence of the give-and-take reciprocity discourse in young people’s accounts may arise from the popular characterization of our culture in postfeminist terms, where women are supposed to have achieved equality (including sexual equality) with men (Gill, 2007, 2008). This climate encourages young people to narrate their experiences as if they are characterized by equality (e.g., it’s “give and take”), and smooth over aspects of inequality (e.g., that oral sex on men is considered “easier” and is more expected). Yet emphasis on reciprocity in oral sex within young people’s accounts helps divert attention from the work that women describe doing to manage their embodied experience of giving oral sex. Other studies have also identified how sexual acts can be constructed as work (Frith, 2013). Burns and colleagues (2011), found a discourse comparable to that of academic achievement in young women’s “fellatio narratives,” characterized by emphasis on the technical skills required to give head successfully, the need to practice, and a sense of competence in a “job done well.” Like Burns and colleagues, we found echoes of achievement discourse in young women’s narratives of giving oral sex, including talk about working to manage both their own embodied experience and their partners’ emotional response, presumably because women were less likely than men to stop giving oral sex when they did not like it. In contrast, while the construction of oral-vulva contact as work for men may be seen in magazines imploring men to learn the skills required to give “great head,” we found little evidence in young men’s own accounts that this was a primary concern.

When assessing the data presented here, it is important to recognize these accounts of oral sex were generated through face-to-face conversations with older women in which articulating certain discourses may have been especially difficult. It is possible, for example, that young men’s talk about strategies to manage the work of giving oral sex to women was constrained or claims of adherence to an ethic of reciprocity

overplayed. It is also possible that young women's articulation of pleasure and desire relating to giving and receiving oral sex was restricted by a cultural climate in which articulating female sexual desire remains problematic. Given the nature of the research, young people who are uncomfortable speaking about sex are less likely to have participated. As our study focused on the discourses of oral sex in young people's accounts, it seems likely that those who did not participate would still be exposed to the types of constructions that we describe here; indeed, the equivalent/nonequivalent constructions of oral sex appeared in narratives across our diverse sample in three field sites. We consider it likely these constructs would also be found in young people's talk about sex outside this project, in England and possibly more widely, although of course we cannot know whether or how their accounts might vary compared with those of our interviewees. Our study examined accounts of oral sex between men and women, and an interesting area of further research would be to investigate the extent to which these types of constructs operate within encounters between same-sex partners: Are ideas about the costs of giving similar when partners share similar genitals, and is oral sex constructed as something that "should" be reciprocal?

To conclude, we suggest that young people's simultaneous use of apparently contradictory constructions of oral sex reflects a collision of broader prevailing discourses of heterosex emphasizing "female empowerment," on one hand, while prioritizing men's pleasure, on the other. Furthermore, while men's nonreciprocation can be explained through women's ambivalence about receiving ("some girls aren't comfortable"), the construction of oral-penis contact as "easier" and something "all men like" constrains the discourses available to women to account for not giving oral sex. Where women do give oral sex, the contemporary obligation to present women's actions as "freely chosen" permeates the narratives, yet young men and women do not appear to be equally positioned to make these "choices": Oral-vulva and oral-penis contact are constructed as carrying different costs and benefits, with different penalties for not reciprocating.

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Notes

- 1 Such accounts tended to frame oral-vulva contact as "foreplay"—something to "get you in the mood"—where "her" orgasm is "given" with the assumption that this will be followed by "his" orgasm through vaginal intercourse (see also Braun et al., 2003).
- 2 These accounts of deliberate passivity and minimal work contain an implication that men do the majority of the "work" during "sex" (i.e., vaginal intercourse).

- 3 The other three men had not experienced any form of partnered genital contact, and their inexperience with oral-vulva contact might be interpreted as lack of opportunity rather than strong distaste for the practice.

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